

Sleeping in the Forest, Awaking to Myself on the Appalachian Trail

by Michael F. Latza

I don't know about tenderly, but nature welcomes me back robustly every year as I hike along the Appalachian Trail in Western Virginia. Two other instructors and myself take a group of students on a two week hike, read, hike, write, hike, discussion, hike, immersion course. I do feel the earth under my feet, the miles stumbling away, the sweet air burning into and out of my lungs as I try to catch my breath on the steep uphill climbs. I cannot gulp breath quickly or deeply enough. I stop more frequently each year. But the perfect trees, and the mountains, and the vistas settle me, in spite of my bass drum staccato heartbeat. When, after dark, I fall to the earth in my sleeping bag; I become as a dead stone weight dropped from the sky. I do not move for hours. I wake, turn, stiff, but happy, and sleep deeply again, on the lap of Iron Mountain.

Our first night of camping, I catch our students standing in the middle of the national forest road, the best place within the woods to see the light show of the Milky Way. They crane their necks straight up in amazement, occasionally ducking down to admonish one of their peers to, "Come over—you've got to see this!" These celestial fires are hidden in the wash of parking lot light back home. Then they quiet as the truth of the scale of the universe makes itself a home inside of each of them.

It is exciting to hear the woods alive in the considered silence of the night, after the crackling of the fire is out, and all have gone to their tents. The scrapings and scuttlings of insects and mice, the distant hootings of owls working the dark, the close chuffing and stamping of a buck as he wonders just who has dared come into his territory. I often wake and wonder just who, or what, is shuffling around in the fallen, dried leaves, making a circuit of our campsite on the mountain slope. I used to sleep with my tent flaps open until one night when a mouse decided to take a shortcut through my tent and over me in my sleeping bag. Now I listen, zipped up safely in my cocoon, as the woodland critters forget we are here and go about their business.

I do remember moths and camping, but not in Virginia. It was some years ago, camping with my sons in the Northwoods of Wisconsin, with our Boy Scout Troop. One of the fathers was sitting up late at night, at a well-worn picnic table, reading *Silence of the Lambs*, by Thomas Harris. The glaring white light of the hissing lantern had drawn moths, hundreds of moths, into the space underneath the trees. Some of these moths were the size of a man's hand, and their weird, alien-like antennae were almost as large as the moths themselves. They had covered the table, the bark of the surrounding trees, the book that the father was reading from, and the father himself. As I walked into the lighted circle, the father knowingly, gently turned his head to face me so as to not disturb his new friends, and then turned back down to his reading. Yea, creeped me out. I was glad that I wasn't tenting with him.

We are at the end of an evening introduction to local mountain music with Wayne Henderson and The Whitetop Mountain Band, at Grayson Highlands State Park. The Mountain culture is to always welcome strangers, and soon our students were Appalachian clogging and flat footing along with the natives, off to the side of the stage. This, "lesson," in local culture, this joyful immersion, is an experience which our students will never forget. They are on fire with the excitement of pushing themselves past their comfort zones as they chatter away in the vans on the drive back to our tents in the woods. We decide to pull over at the Sugarlands Overlook. Normally we would gaze out over seventy odd miles of sugar maple rolling hills, mountains, and valleys. Tonight, in the enveloping darkness, our gaze is directed above, to the millions of stars in the skies. Suddenly, someone sees it—the flash of a meteor blazing across the white fire of the stars. The silence is broken by calls of, "Oh, look, over there!" rising and falling, accompanied by arms reaching heavenward. Our expectations rise and fall with the universe, working in the darkness, vanishing into the ether, all of us coalescing with nature into something better than we were.